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Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

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Our Little Secrets

Tsunamis of Blood

By JOSEPH NEVINS

When I saw Paul Wolfowitz's smug grin in the January 17 issue of *The New York Times*, it was clear that trouble was on the horizon. The photo showed him in tsunami-stricken Indonesia, accompanying the country's defense minister, Juwono Sudarsono.

The first and only time I ever encountered Wolfowitz in person was on May 7, 1997. I was in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington. The occasion was a hearing of the House of Representative's Committee on International Relations' Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific. The subject was "United States Policy Toward Indonesia."

Wolfowitz served as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs from 1982 to 1986, and as ambassador to Indonesia during the Reagan administration's final three years. He thus was the primary architect of U.S. policy toward the resource-rich country in the 1980s. During his tenure, U.S. support for the Indonesian army peaked despite, among many crimes, the military's illegal occupation of East Timor, which resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 people. At the time of the May 1997 hearing on Capitol Hill, he was serving as the dean of the School of Advanced International Studies of the John Hopkins University.

Wolfowitz's testimony that day stressed Indonesia's many "achievements" and invoked Jakarta's charade-like prosecution and sentencing to minimal prison terms of a handful of low-ranking army officers in response to international criticism over what Indone-

(**Wolfowitz** *continued on page 2)*

The Election in Iraq

How Do the Votes Add Up?

By PATRICK COCKBURN

It was a very strange election. Not since the war which overthrew Saddam Hussein had there been such a gap between the reality of politics in Iraq and the picture presented by the US and British governments.

It was not a bad election but it came too late. It may join a list of polls from Haiti to Cambodia lauded by the media at the time as a breakthrough but which never affected the real structure of power. Many Iraqis used the same words about the elections. They said they are "like a film" or "like a movie directed by the US".

If the elections had been held soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein it would have been before the present miserable system had begin to jell. The splits between Sunni, Shia and Kurd would not have been so deep. The insurgents would not be so well established. It was ironic that at the very moment that Iyad Allawi, the interim prime minister, was congratulating everybody on the elections as the beginning of the end of the great Sunni rebellion the insurgents were to shoot down a British C-130 killing all ten on board. No wonder Tony Blair refused to reveal the casualties when he appeared before the press to praise the election as justifying the war.

The poll was portrayed as though Washington and London had finally been able to reach their goal of delivering democracy to Iraqis - as if this had been their aim in overthrowing Saddam Hussein. In fact the US postponed elections to a distant future after the invasion of 2003. Victory over Saddam Hussein was so swift that the American administration thought it could rule Iraq directly. Iraqis, and then only those who arrived on the back of a US tank, would play a limited, subservient role.

It was only in the autumn of 2003 that the US made two unpleasant Discoveries. The guerrilla attacks in Sunni districts of Iraq were escalating by the day. They were supposedly confined to "the Sunni triangle", a description which has a comfortingly limited ring to it, but in practice is an area larger than Britain.

The second development which Paul Bremer, the head of the US-run Coalition Provisional Authority, was slow to understand was that an elderly Shiite cleric living in an alleyway in the holy city of Najaf had more influence than any of the whisky-swilling former Iraqi exiles on the US payroll.

In June 2003, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most influential Shi'a leader, issued a religious ruling saying that those who drew up Iraq's constitution must be elected, not nominated, by the US and the Iraqi Governing Council, whose members Washington had appointed. In November 2003 he issued a further ruling saying that the transitional government must be elected.

Shi'a leaders believed they had made a grave mistake after Britain defeated the Turkish army and occupied what became Iraq in the First World War. It was Shi'a who revolted against the British occupation in 1920 with the result that Britain relied on the Sunni community to rule Iraq and the Sunni kept their grip on power under the monarchy, the Republic and Saddam.

The reason why there was a poll on January 30 was that the US, facing an escalating war against the five million Sunni, dared not provoke revolt by the 15-16 million Shi'a. The price the US paid was to have an election in which the Shi'a would show that they are a majority of Iraqis.

(**Iraq** *continued on page 3)*

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(**Wolfowitz** *continued from page 1*)

sia termed "the Santa Cruz incident"—a November 1991 massacre by the U.S.-armed and trained army of hundreds of peaceful pro-independence demonstrators in East Timor's capital.

In his prepared statement submitted to the subcommittee, Wolfowitz praised Indonesia's dictator, Suharto a man who seized power in 1965 through what the CIA described "as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century." [And the CIA should know since its station chief in Jakarta submitted lists of Communists and others to Suharto's death squad organizers. Eds.]

In 1998, huge protests led Asia's longest-reigning dictator to step down. Wolfowitz quickly changed his tune, later characterizing Suharto in an interview on *PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer* as someone who "without any question was fighting reform every step of the way." Yet, he continued to defend the Indonesian military as a force for good.

On February 17, 1999, Wolfowitz was in the secretary of state's private dining room for a working dinner called by its hostess, Madeleine Albright. The invited guests were academics, all of whom were Indonesia specialists. At the end of the dinner, the secretary of state asked the guests specific questions about developments in Indonesia, a country she was preparing to visit in March. The last topic of discussion was East Timor.

Geoffrey Robinson, a historian at the University of California, Los Angeles made it clear in his remarks that only a legitimate act of self-determination—in the form of some sort of universal ballot organized and run by the United Nations—would satisfy the East Timorese population, and that there were no viable alternatives.

Sitting at the other end of the table, Wolfowitz quickly responded, informing Albright and the other guests that independence for East Timor was simply not a realistic option. Only the Indonesian military had been able to put an end to the fighting, according to the esteemed former professor.

A State Department official politely called the evening to a close as soon as Robinson informed Wolfowitz of the wrong-headed nature of his analysis.

The Indonesian army's myriad crimes in East Timor could not have happened without the significant economic, military, and diplomatic support of the army from the United States. Indeed, such support was decisive in allowing the 1975 invasion to take place and for the occupation to endure as long it did. But Washington has effectively buried this history.

The intentional nature of this "forgetting" – in addition to the deep bipartisan nature of support for U.S. empire – was on shameless display on May 13, 2000, in Italy at the Bologna Center of the Johns Hopkins University. The guest speaker was Richard Holbrooke. Introducing him was Dean Paul Wolfowitz.

After Wolfowitz's flowery welcome, Holbrooke returned the favor, cracking a joke about how the introduction showed that he gets "better treatment from Republicans than Democrats in some quarters." He then praised the former ambassador to Jakarta as "a continuing participant in the effort to find the right policy for one of the most important countries in the world, Indonesia." Holbrooke proceeded to explain how Wolfowitz's "activities illustrate something that's very important about American foreign policy in an election year and that is the degree to which there are still common themes between the parties. East Timor is a good example. Paul and I have been in frequent touch to make sure that we keep it out of the presidential campaign, where it would do no good to American or Indonesian interests."

Yet, despite such efforts, Congress significantly weakened military ties with Jakarta in 1999 and has since prevented reinstatement as a result of public outrage over the army's atrocities in East Timor and elsewhere, and past U.S. support for such. It is this situation that Paul Wolfowitz and the Bush administration are eager to reverse. The tragedy in Indonesia—especially in the region of Aceh where over 150,000 lost their lives and a long-standing war over independence is taking place—has provided an opportunity to do just that.

In Jakarta on Sunday, February 16, Wolfowitz argued that weak ties with the Indonesian army exacerbate the problems of Indonesia (which presumably include fighting "terrorism" and providing humanitarian relief to tsunami victims)—and thus those of the United States. The way to promote the army's supposed efforts to make itself more professional and accountable, he asserted, is to increase U.S. military sales and training—the same argument that he used to make in the 1990s when Washington's relations with Jakarta came under attack.

But just as before, there is no evidence to indicate the army's conduct has changed or is interested in doing so. Human rights groups report continuing widespread atrocities—especially in Aceh and West Papua. An October report by Amnesty International, for example, writes of "evidence of a disturbing pattern of grave abuses of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights" in Aceh for which Indonesian security forces bear "primary responsibility." The human rights violations—including extrajudicial executions, torture and the rape of women and girls—have taken place at a scale "so pervasive that there is virtually no part of life in the province which remains untouched," the Amnesty report says.

As it did in the 1980s and 1990s, Paul Wolfowitz's current recipe for Indonesia will not bring about "reform," but will only make Washington complicit in the armed forces' crimes. CP

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(**Iraq** *continued from page 1)*

But will the election of January 30 involve a real transfer of power to the Shi'a? Last June Iraqi sovereignty was supposedly transferred to the US- appointed interim government of Iyad Allawi. The change was largely a mirage. The government still depends for its existence on the presence of 150,000 US troops.

The wall-to-wall media coverage of the election obscured several of the realities of political life in Iraq. The National Assembly now being elected will have limited powers. It is constituted so no single community can dominate the others. But, as in Lebanon, this may be a recipe for paralysis. It must elect a President and two vice presidents and they will in turn chose a prime minister and ministers. The successful candidate will be the person with the least enemies.

Some US commentators have wondered if Washington might not be able to hold Iraq or at least remain in covert control by relying on the Kurds and the Shi'a. Together they make up 80 per cent of the population. This is known as "the 20 per cent solution" whereby the US will able to deal with a rebellion supported by the Sunni Arabs, who make up only 20 per cent of the population.

Such a policy, though momentarily comforting for Washington and London, is based on a misconception. The Sunni are resisting the US occupation in arms. The Shi'a have not joined this rebellion, though Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mehdi Army fought the US Marines for Najaf last August.

A central feature of Iraqi politics is that since overthrow of Saddam Hussein the US has become steadily more unpopular in Iraq outside Kurdistan. This is true of the Shi'a as well as the Sunni. An opinion poll by Zogby International just before the recent election shows that the Sunni Arabs who want the US out now or very soon total 82 per cent. The proportion of Shi'a wanting the US to go is less than the Sunni but still overwhelming at 69 per cent.

Indeed, Shiite religious leaders have been telling their followers to vote as the quickest way to end the occupation. The unpopularity of the US presence in Shi'a districts is confirmed by interviews in the street. "What did the US ever do for us? " asked one of a group of laborers, all Shi'a, unloading bottled gas cylinders from a truck. "God bless Saddam!" Praise for Saddam Hussein from a Shi'a in a public place would have been unheard of eighteen months ago.

Men waiting for hours in the long queues outside petrol stations all spontaneously criticised the US though many of them said they would vote. The enthusiasm with which so many Shi'a went to the polls is a double-edged weapon. They did so in the belief that their ballots would translate into power. They will not be satisfied if the new National Assembly is a photocopy of the present government, nominally sovereign, but largely dependent on the US.

The fact that there has been an election will impress international opinion, but in the immediate future it changes very little in Iraq. The world is full of parliaments duly elected by a free ballot but power stays elsewhere with the army, the security services or, in the case of Iraq today, an occupying foreign power. In the former Soviet states these are known as 'Potemkin parliaments'

The world is full of parliaments elected by a free ballot but power stays elsewhere with the army, the security services or, in the case of Iraq, an occupying power.

intended to impress visitors with the trappings of democracy but without authority.

The press is notoriously prone to see elections as an end in themselves even if the assemblies and parliaments they produce have a purely decorative role outside the real power structure. The media are also at their worse in prescripted events such as the election in Iraq. Senior members of news organizations become involved in planning. Top correspondents are dispatched to the front line. The result is a pre- Napoleonic army, smartly turned out and marching in step, but incapable of responding to fast-changing political reality in Iraq,

Commentators were soon floundering in the intricacies of Iraqi politics. Exactly who turned out to vote in Mosul, the northern capital on the Tigris? There were pictures of men standing in line to vote. But Mosul has 300,000 Kurds as well as 1.5 million Arabs. If they were Kurds, then the whole point of a high Sunni turnout in the city would be destroyed. And if they were not Kurds perhaps they were Chaldean or Assyrian Christians?

"Starting from today I will begin a new dialogue to make sure that all Iraqis have a voice" said Allawi as the interim government jubilantly celebrated the unexpectedly high turn out at the polls. The success or failure of the National Assembly depends on whether it can meet voters' high expectations said Dr Mahmoud Othman, who is sure to be a member of it because he is fourth on the list of Kurdish candidates. He said that a new government must be able to talk to the resistance, arrange a time-table for an American withdrawal and end the economic and social crisis in Iraq. He said: "If the new government is no different from the old one that is not so good. The people expect change."

The make up of the 275-member assembly will take time to emerge. In the election Iraq was treated as one constituency in which each party, which has submitted a slate of candidates, will be allocated seats in proportion to percentage of the vote it has received. The three big winners are expected to be the Kurds, the slate of Iyad Allawi, expected to attract many secular voters, and the so-called Shiite list, created under the auspices though not the direct backing of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Shia spiritual leader.

But the future of Iraq may depend on the degree of success of each of these parties. Dr Ghassan Attiyah, the Iraqi political scientist and writer, said that it would be highly polarizing if the Shia and the Kurds were wholly dominant. This would further alienate the Sunni Arabs.

The Kurds -- themselves mostly Sunni -- and the Shia have difficulty in agreeing on common policies. Dr Attiyah declared: "If the Shi'a list has 140 seats, the Kurds 65-70 and Allawi with most of the rest it will not be good news. It would also help if the smaller parties win votes because then there will have to be compromises in sharing power." It would be better, Dr Attiyah continued, if the Shia list got 70-75 seats, Allawi 60-65 and the Kurds 60-65 and the rest to smaller groups

If the Shi'a list is denied an overwhelming victory then the other two communities will be less worried. Allawi's party seemed to be gaining ground before the poll because he had portrayed himself as the only secular candidate likely to do well. This made him particularly attractive to urban voters in Baghdad and Basra who are well educated and fear the clerical parties. But Shia list leaders insist they swept the board in much of southern Iraq. CP

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Remember the New Unity Partnership?

First the Wedding; Now the Wake

By JoAnn Wypijewski

Poor Andy Stern. When he posed for a New York Times Magazine photographer standing on a window-washer's swing with arms outstretched, he probably didn't think about the iconic freight such a posture carries. There was President Stern in his purple blouse, paschal color of the country's largest union, SEIU, with tiered ranks of service workers behind him, applauding. For someone with a messianic streak, the tableau should serve as both affirmation and warning. We know what happens once the cheering stops.

Readers of CounterPunch will remember that it was right here (on the website actually, October 6, 2003, and November 4, 2003) that Stern's brainchild, the New Unity Partnership, received its first and only thorough critical assessment in the press. For many rank and file workers—and a few presidents of international unions—it was the first they'd heard of a scheme by five union presidents to remake organized labor.

Much was made in the ensuing months of the NUP, which was to be a kind of template for a new brand of unionism, one of collaboration and innovation, organizing and, most important of all, big new ideas. "Build it and they will come", Stern said of the partnership between himself, Bruce Raynor of UNITE, John Wilhelm of HERE, Terry O'Sullivan of the Laborers and our personal favorite, Doug (Cash) McCarron of the Carpenters.

But the foundation was barely laid before the architects quit the site. On January 4 of this year the NUP dissolved. Officially the word was that it had served its purpose by kindling a debate within the AFL-CIO. Its structural accomplishment: the merger of UNITE and HERE. Its organizational accomplishment: a campaign among SEIU, UNITE and HERE to organize employees of the building-services multinational Sodexho.

Of course, the debate, the merger, the campaign, each could have been achieved without the NUP, which, if remembered at all, will go down in the annals of labor as a rather shabby advertisement for newness, unity or partnership.

Behind the official declaration of Mission Accomplished, the word is that unity chafed this odd quintet like a barbed wire straightjacket. McCarron and O'Sullivan never were the best match politically for the more liberal Raynor, Wilhelm and Stern, though the latter three did their best to court McCarron's Republican friends, buying tables at a Republican Congressional Campaign Committee fete, sending out letters urging labor contributions to Dennis Hastert. Stern even contributed half a million dollars to the Republican Governors Association, an outfit whose champions of right-to-work laws happily advise their colleagues about how they too can make their states safe from union organizing.

Natural, too, in a debate dominated on SEIU's side by the rather pathetic top-boy slogan "Size matters", that Hoffa, should want to be Stern's new partner.

McCarron, a power junky according to his critics in the building trades, may be hard to work with, but there were other stressers too. Wilhelm hasn't said he wants to challenge John Sweeney for the federation presidency this summer, but everyone's been talking about it and there's a new statesmanlike tone he affects when speaking of institutional reform. Stern is said to be against such a run. As one of the central players in engineering Sweeney's victory ten years ago, he always was brilliant at crunching the numbers and organizing the voting blocs, and if there's one rule in labor that still holds it's that you don't contest an election at high levels unless you know you've already got it.

As an organizing vehicle for a possible run at the top job, the NUP was insane, seeing as how it dangled before union presidents, the decisive members of the voting constituency, the prospects they hate most: losing their power (and maybe their jobs) in forced mergers, and losing potential dues units through forced sectoral purity. (Central to the NUP plan was a proposal to collapse the federation's 58 unions into 15 or 20, and to prohibit unions from organizing outside their core jurisdictions, be it auto, hotels and restaurants, communications, etc.) Not to mention that running the AFL-CIO, over whose member unions the president has about as much control as Kofi Annan over each of the UN's member countries, is not quite as much fun as blasting away from within, or without.

Stern has famously said that he wants to blow up the federation; by comparison an electoral challenge is goody-good reformism. Meanwhile, Raynor is believed to favor such a challenge, the better to get Wilhelm out of the way and leave Raynor solidly at the helm of UNITE/HERE. Terry O'Sullivan's name has been dropped for years as a possible contender for Sweeney's job.

So all was not happy in NUPland, but the break probably really came after the presidential election in November, when Stern dropped his "Unite to Win" pamphlet, website and ultimatum on the AFL-CIO's Executive Council without first running it by his partners.

The pamphlet's content was not all that different from the NUP's agenda, except that it bore the imprint not of the NUP but of SEIU, against an attractive shade of puce. "Unity", in word and deed, was devaluing by the minute.

Calling for debate, Stern announced before the meeting that unless the assembled union poobahs acted on what was

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now his agenda, he might pull his 1.7 million members out of the federation. It was a little like George Bush saying only days earlier that he was willing to work with anyone so long as they accepted his goals. The tag line for SEIU's Purple Ocean website pretty well sums up its leader's philosophy: "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." Not much room there for equality, fraternity or solidarity, and no one will be too surprised if at the Executive Council's next meeting, on March 1, Stern walks. He has declared on his Unite to Win website that the "time to decide" has arrived, and he appears to need drama like air.

Now enter a new blowhard onto the scene: the Teamsters' James P. Hoffa. With union leaders in a competitive whirl to advance their own restructuring proposals, it was only natural that Hoffa, whose sense of entitlement probably exceeds that of Stern—the former's based on Daddy, the latter's on notions of generational destiny—would elbow his way to the front of the crowd.

Natural too, in a debate dominated on SEIU's side by the winking and rather pathetic top-boy slogan "Size matters", that the leader of America's second-largest union should want to be Stern's new partner.

What's out of whack is that the Teamsters are the most prominent violators of Stern's commandment of sectoral purity, representing not only truckers, warehouse/distribution workers and food processors but public sector workers, airline mechanics, white collars, nurses.

And while the Teamsters have devoted more money to organizing, when Hoffa talks organizing, what he typically emphasizes is mergers. That would be right in line with Stern's sermons on the virtues of consolidation, except consider the Teamsters' latest merger, the biggest in its history.

About two months ago the union absorbed the 60,000 graphic workers in GCIU. As one Teamster rank-and-file activist put it: "If anyone says to the Teamsters, What's your core jurisdiction? they'll say, Everything. We have newspaper drivers, for instance, and a few GCIU members still work for newspapers, therefore graphic workers are in our core jurisdiction."

If you're big enough you can justify anything that way.

Stern has not blasted the merger as reckless or unstrategic, a violation of the rules of industrial density, an unproductive mania for growth that is thin rather than deep.

Instead, he and Hoffa emerged as allies at a January 10 Executive Council meeting, with Hoffa denouncing bureaucratic waste (something he should know a great deal about) and pressing for the federation to rebate half the money unions currently pay into it if those unions can demonstrate that they are using the money to organize.

The hitch is that by Hoffa's formula the only unions that could qualify for the rebates are the big ones. Small unions that, by dint of the size of their budgets, do not meet Hoffa's $2 million threshold for organizing would get no break, even if they had excellent organizing programs.

But then, in the SEIU imagination, small unions don't deserve to exist. Small locals that workers might actually be able to control, with leaderships they could hold accountable by challenging in elections, are too inefficient to exist. (In this, the Teamsters actually have more claim on democracy than the purple tide.) SEIU's web blog is rich with survival-of-the-fittest sentiment—a nasty smattering of size matters, out-of-our-way, organizer-as-tough-guy rhetoric that matches the pressure its staff and organizers toil under.

It has long been known that the union demands an all-consuming dedication from its organizers that few SEIU workers would wish to embody, a sacrifice of rest, personal relations, sanity, sobriety. Now on top of that is the relentless demand for posting numbers, toting up the dues units; and should the numbers lag, today's hero can be tomorrow's discarded goat. Stern is fond of applying the language of corporate management to the business of union organizing, as he did again in the Times Magazine article of January 30, aptly titled "The New Boss"; the iron logic of scale and the bottom line is an obvious consequence.

Ten years ago when Sweeney was putting together his challenge to the AFL-CIO leadership the general line of union radicals was that, whatever disagreements one might have, internal debate was good. It seems unnecessary to have to reiterate the value of debate now, except that supporters of once the NUP and now Stern or maybe Stern-Hoffa tend reflexively to say their critics oppose the full flowering of ideas, embrace the status quo. Nonsense, of course, but it works for the reformers' new admirers on the right.

In late January the pundit Robert Novak lavished praise upon Hoffa and Stern for taking on the "barons of the American labor movement", a story no doubt greased by the slippery Greg Tarpinian, erstwhile radical, familiar of both the NUP and the precincts of the right and longtime Hoffa boy.

The structure of the AFL-CIO is no doubt a mess, but it's not what organizers in the field or workers in the shop typically name as the thing that keeps unions out or corporations vicious or laws rigged against them or life insecure. It is, however, just the thing that toadies for capital like Novak would appreciate and, having ditched worker power, class consciousness and social solidarity, it's all that marquee reformers really have.

If Hoffa takes up Stern's idea that introducing a little competition and private speculation into the Social Security system might be a good thing, Novak will doubtless be on that in an instant too, applauding the new bosses for their new maturity. CP

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Tsunami Aid: How the People Scored

By Alexander Cockburn

I made some sour comments in our last issue on the radio commentator Sean Hannity preening about America's generous disbursements to the victims of the tsunami and denouncing the Saudis as a bunch of skinflints, stinting to their Muslim brothers and sisters. On and on he went as though the entire meaning and consequence of the great tidal wave had been to advertise the innate generosity of the US government.

Shortly thereafter Rachard Itani sent us a good piece on the actual numbers, which we ran on our website. Rachard began by citing figures compiled by the London Observer, showing that Norwegians donated the most per head of population ($13.20) followed by the Swedes ($12.04), the Dutch ($9.16) the Australians ($5.23) and so on, down to the Americans with a donation of $1.08 per head, and the Euro-swollen French, whose per head donation amounted to 80 U.S. cents.

The Observer table put Saudi Arabs in the middle of the pack, at number 6 with a donation of $4 per head, but still outranking Canadians, Austrians, Brits, Greeks, Americans and French in their generosity.

Itani took the Observer's numbers a stage further, by comparing donations as a percentage of per- capita income, the average amount of money each head of population is theoretically supposed to earn. This measure of generosity, Itani wrote, "showed private Saudi individuals as the most generous amongst the people of the 12 countries mentioned in the Observer article, followed in descending order by the Swedes, Dutch, Norwegians, Australians, Germans, Canadians, Greeks, Austrians, Brits, French, and in 12th and final place, Americans." In fact the Saudis were 1,617% more generous than 12th place Americans.

And since the Observer's numbers compared private, not official donations, the generosity of Saudi individuals cannot be dismissed away as resulting from their oil wealth. Indeed, Saudi per-capita income, at $8,530, pales in comparison with American per capita income at $37,610. "Interestingly," Itani went on, "the pattern of poorer people giving a larger percentage of their income to charity than richer people is mirrored in domestic US private charitable donation patterns: it's a well documented fact that poorer Americans donate a larger percentage of their income to charity than the richer amongst them do."

Like many communities across the country, we had a tsunami fund-raiser here in Petrolia at the Grange Hall. It raised $2,700 . I asked Margie Smith, one of the organizers, where the money was going and she said they were thinking of Oxfam or some kindred outfit. I shook my head at this, remarking that the money would end up buying some non-profit desk officer in New York a computer. Better, I said, (repeating a thought I'd expressed here) that we get someone heading in the direction of the beleaguered region to take the money, find a village and hand it out, preferably in small bills so the local thugs wouldn't collar the lot. It now looks as though this might happen.

But surely there's a good organizing opportunity here, in the tradition of the sister city programs that became such a prominent and excellent feature of the solidarity work with Nicaragua in the 1980s and today with Palestinian towns and villages.

What better than direct contacts with towns and villages across the region, with money and work parties, prelude to long-term relations. There's nothing like a friendly person showing up, preferably with a wad of money in hand, rather than an aid bureaucrat with a hundred forms to be filled out in triplicate before you can get a dime.

I remember after the Loma Prieta earthquake in the late 1980s a couple of guys in a truck showed up in Watsonville, which had been very badly hit by the quake. "You from the government?" one of the homeless asked. "No," one of the rednecks said as he unloaded tents and stoves from his pic k-up and trailer. "We're from Benicia. This is people to people."

Disasters expose the frailties and cruelties of governments and officialdom. They offer creative political opportunity. That is a silver lining. CP

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